

February 24, 2010

Mr. Blair Levin  
Director  
Omnibus Broadband Initiative  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Mr. Levin:

I am submitting this letter for consideration in the National Broadband Plan on behalf of the News Literacy Project, a national nonprofit educational program.

In declaring October 2009 as National Information Literacy Awareness Month, President Obama said: "A 24-hour news cycle and thousands of global television and radio networks, coupled with an immense array of online resources, have challenged our long-held perceptions of information management. Rather than merely possessing data, we must also learn the skills necessary to acquire, collate, and evaluate information for any situation. This new type of literacy also requires competency with communication."

Even as the explosion of new communications technologies — such as broadband — provides enormous amounts of information to the American public, these sources also challenge citizens to distinguish credible information from raw information, misinformation and propaganda. This is particularly important for the next generation of consumers, who spend so much time accessing entertainment and information on their electronic devices yet are not being given the tools they need to sort fact from fiction in a digital age.

The National Broadband Plan represents an extraordinary opportunity to increase news literacy education to millions of students, as well as to provide the transmission pipeline to deliver these vital critical thinking skills. This effort could go hand in hand with the upgrading of the E-rate program to improve broadband access in public elementary and secondary schools. We strongly believe that a national commitment to promoting news literacy will lead to a better-informed citizenry, increased civic engagement and a stronger democracy.

The need is clear. In its report "Young People and News," a Carnegie Corporation-Knight Foundation task force raised serious concerns about the future of a well-informed citizenry, the heart of a healthy democracy.

The report found that half of teens and young adults between ages 18 and 30 rarely, if ever, read a newspaper and did not make consumption of news from any source part of their daily routine. The study, released in 2007, reported that respondents were drawn to stories "that have little or no public affairs content" and that many were "ill-equipped to process the hard news stories they encounter."

More recently, a 2010 report by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation found that 8- to 18-year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes daily to entertainment media "a 17% increase in the past five years. The study found that "use of every type of media has increased over the past 10 years, with the exception of reading," including newspapers and magazines. The time spent with such publications online was limited, too.

Even as the Internet has given students unprecedented amounts of information at their fingertips, many of these users consider Google their primary source.

Students often seem to think that the information they get from myriad sources is all created equal. They may view it all as equally credible or as equally driven by bias "personal, ideological, partisan or commercial. What gets lost in this thinking is any sense of standards or fairness or accountability " the ideals of quality journalism.

A key source for many is Wikipedia, with its provisional and participatory arc of truth. Students can, of course, act like historians and drill down to the primary sources " but how many devote the time and effort to do so?

And how would students know otherwise? Neither media literacy nor its more focused tributary, news literacy, is widely taught in American public schools. At the same time, the national education system has increasingly focused on standardized tests that have tended to drive out what was known as "civics" or "current events."

A 2007 survey by another Carnegie-Knight task force found that even those teachers who recognize the value of using news in the classroom said they planned to do so less in the future because of the demands of mandatory testing. Hardest hit, the commission found, are disadvantaged urban and rural students, whose parents tend to pay less attention to public affairs and discuss news less at home.

Amid the 21st-century explosion of technology, young people today tend to be fixated on social networking " connecting with each other through a virtual, omnipresent world of cellphones and computers.

Of course, students are learning a tremendous amount through these networks " about each other

and each other's tastes, about their comings and goings, about music and sports and, in the 2008 election, about Barack Obama. There is no doubt that through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and all the other digital media, young people have immediate access to enormous amounts of information.

Moreover, as they text and e-mail and blog in this new participatory information age, they are themselves not only consumers but also producers ? what Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in *The Elements of Journalism* call ?pro-sumers.?

Yet these young people must deal not only with the many ways that information is delivered in this rapidly changing electronic landscape, but also with the daunting task of determining the reliability of a tsunami of sources. Most are simply not learning how to discern credible information from raw information, opinion, gossip, spin, advertising and propaganda.

How many understand the difference between a news report in *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* or on NPR and a posting by the proverbial pajama-clad blogger or a politically charged viral e-mail? And if they don't, why would they ever seek quality journalism?

Without some education and guidance, in this era of raised voices and short attention spans, how are students to know what to believe?

After 29 years as a newspaper reporter, primarily in the Washington bureau of the *Los Angeles Times*, I launched the News Literacy Project in 2008 with two primary goals: to light a spark of interest in information that has a public purpose, and to give students the critical thinking skills to sort fact from fiction in the digital age ? enabling them to seek and prize credible information through whatever medium and on whatever platform they find it.

What skills do they need to do so? First, they need to recognize what my colleague Howie Schneider, the founder of the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University, calls ?What neighborhood are you in??

Are you in the news neighborhood? The opinion neighborhood? The advertising neighborhood? What kind of information are you looking at, listening to or watching? What standards and vetting have been applied to the way this information was gathered and presented?

If you are looking at what purports to be news, how can you judge its veracity? First, assuming you can know, who created it and for what purpose? Is the goal a dispassionate, if imperfect, search for truth to serve the public interest? Or has the information been created to persuade, motivate, manipulate or inflame?

What are the sources? Are they named? Are they eyewitnesses? Experts? Is there more than one source? Do the sources have an ax to grind? What data or documents are cited to verify the report's assertions?

Is the report fair? Is there more than one perspective given? Is the subject given a chance to respond?

Is there bias, and how can you tell? How do journalists deal with their own biases? What is the downside of audience bias ? seeking information only from sources with which one is likely to agree?

We also address the principle of accountability: how does an information provider deal with challenges to its veracity, particularly factual mistakes? Does the provider demonstrate willingness, and a process, to acknowledge and correct errors and set the record straight?

We tackle this challenge by partnering with middle school and high school English, social studies, history and government teachers. We bring journalists into their classrooms as well as providing innovative curriculum that examines these and other questions. This material is intended to engage and resonate with students.

The journalists make presentations to the students that provide insights into the newsgathering process and that challenge the students to think about where they obtain their information and how they evaluate it.

We've built our curriculum materials and journalist presentations around four pillars:

- ? Why does news matter?
- ? Why is the First Amendment protection of free speech so vital to American democracy?
- ? How can students know what to believe?
- ? What challenges and opportunities do the Internet and digital media create?

Our drop-in units culminate with the students using the tools of journalism and new media technologies to create videos, songs, raps, games and other projects that demonstrate real understanding of these issues.

We are currently operating in seven schools in New York City (Brooklyn and Manhattan), Bethesda, Md., and Chicago. In this, our first full school year, we will engage 22 teachers to reach nearly 1,500 students and involve more than 75 journalists in the classroom. Fourteen major journalism organizations, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and NPR, are participating in the News Literacy Project.

We have demonstrated that our innovative model and original curriculum heightens students' awareness and understanding of what to believe in the face of a daily torrent of news and images. Whether they are reading a newspaper, watching television news or clicking on search-engine results, viral e-mail or Wikipedia, we have taught them how to ask the hard questions.

From inner cities to suburbs, from 6th grade to 12th grade, from English to social studies classes, we have demonstrated NLP's effectiveness in giving students the critical thinking skills needed to effectively navigate today's world of new media and help them both consume and create credible information across all platforms.

Teachers, students and journalists have been impressed by our initial progress and promise.

Kristina Wylie, an English teacher at the Facing History School in New York, said the project "offers students the skills, strategies and resources to enable them to question sources and make informed decisions" and provides teachers with "the resources, activities, vocabulary, and real-life journalists to inspire students!"

"Three weeks ago, a lot of my students didn't know what to look for in a newspaper article or didn't know what Google actually did. And they know that now. And I can go build on that in class from here until the end of the year, and they'll build it on throughout high school," Ryan Miller, an 8th-grade history teacher at Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn, N.Y., said after teaching the project's initial unit in 2009.

Miller added, "When a student just stops the conversation and wants to know how could the Red Scare have happened when you have something like the First Amendment, or makes a connection between yellow journalism and the Spanish-American War and corporate ownership of media today, that is where the value really showed for me - that they were making connections about the importance not only to their day-to-day lives, but that these issues have been going on for years in American history."

Matea Gold, a reporter in the New York bureau of the Los Angeles Times, said of the students she spoke to: "They gave a lot of examples that made me feel they really were taking the lessons we had in the classroom and applying it to information they get in their lives. They are learning to think about journalism and learning to think about news in a more sophisticated way than before, which I think makes this project so valuable."

Jennifer Cortez, a 6th-grader at the Marquette School in Chicago, said: "The most important thing I learned from this project is that we are not supposed to believe everything anyone tells us because some things are credible and others aren't. Also, some don't have enough sources to prove that it's

true.?

And Alexa Ciesinski, who participated in the project as a 10th -grade student at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md., said: "We got an in-depth look at how media is produced. " It was really important to a lot of people. It helped us in finding reliable sources. That's a lesson you will keep with you into your college years."

In their efforts to hold on to their often-shrinking audiences, news organizations have tended to focus on the supply side. Our focus is on the demand side of the next generation. In a digital world where anyone can be a publisher, USA Today reporter Kathy Kiely tells our students that everyone has to learn to think like a journalist.

As the Columbia Journalism Review noted in a long, thoughtful piece focusing on our project and news literacy in the July/August issue: "News literacy has the potential to transform itself from the cause of a committed few into a powerful national movement."

The National Broadband Plan could help fuel that transformation. "Our nation's educators and institutions of learning must be aware of " and adjust to " these new realities," President Obama said when he declared October to be National Information Literacy Awareness Month. "In addition to the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, it is equally important that our students are given the tools required to take advantage of the information available to them."

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Alan C. Miller  
Founder and Executive Director  
The News Literacy Project